DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 444 CS 509 810

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TITLE Instructor Socio-Communicative Style, Argumentativeness, and Verbal Aggressiveness in the College Classroom.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 2-5, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; *Assertiveness; Classroom Environment; *College Instruction; Communication Research; Communication Skills; Higher Education; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Surveys; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Characteristics; *Teaching Styles; Verbal Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Argumentativeness; Communication Styles

ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship among instructor socio-communicative style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom. Participants were 139 undergraduate students enrolled at a small southern university who completed the Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure (Richmond and McCroskey, 1995), as well as modified versions of the Argumentativeness scale (Infante and Rancer, 1982), and the Verbal Aggressiveness scale (Infante and Wigley, 1996). Results indicated that: (1) competent and aggressive instructors are rated significantly higher in argumentativeness than submissive instructors and (2) noncompetent and aggressive instructors are rated significantly higher in verbal aggressiveness than either competent or submissive instructors. (Contains 47 references and a table of data.) (Author/CR)

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ED 418 444

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship among instructor socio-communicative style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom. Participants were 139 undergraduate students enrolled at a small southern university who completed the Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995) as well as modified versions of the Argumentativeness scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982) and the Verbal Aggressiveness scale (Infante & Wigley, 1996). Results indicated that (a) competent and aggressive instructors are rated significantly higher in argumentativeness than submissive instructors and (b) noncompetent and aggressive instructors are rated significantly higher in verbal aggressiveness than either competent or submissive instructors.

Instructor Socio-Communicative Style, Argumentativeness,
and Verbal Aggressiveness in the College Classroom

The influence of an instructor's communication behaviors in the college classroom is pervasive. One way in which this influence is felt is through instructor socio-communicative style. Unlike social style, which is based on multiple observers' judgements of an individual's perceived levels of assertiveness and responsiveness (e.g., Wheeless & Lashbrook, 1987), or communicator style, which indicates how literal meaning should be taken based on an individual's combination of verbal and paraverbal behaviors (e.g., Norton, 1978), socio-communicative style centers around the assessment of an individual's use of assertive and responsive communication behaviors (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Assertiveness is an individual's ability to stand up for him or herself and is characterized by terms such as dominant, competitive, and forceful; responsiveness is the manner in which an individual responds to others and is characterized by terms such as sympathetic, passionate, and sincere (Klopf, 1991; Richmond & McCroskey, 1995; Wheeless & Dierks-Stewart, 1981).

In the classroom, perceived instructor assertiveness and responsiveness have an impact on student perceptions of their learning as well as other instructor communication behaviors. Robinson (1993) discovered that perceived student affective and cognitive learning is positively correlated with perceived instructor responsiveness, although the correlation is higher for affective learning. Perceived instructor assertiveness and responsiveness have also been positively correlated with perceived instructor nonverbal immediacy (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994), instructor credibility (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997), student trust (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996), and instructor clarity (Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997). Wanzer and

McCroskey (1998) reported a negative correlation between both perceived instructor assertiveness and responsiveness, and perceived instructor misbehaviors. In addition, Robinson (1993) found that perceived instructor responsiveness is highly correlated with perceived instructor verbal receptivity.

Researchers are also studying the influence of socio-communicative style across various communication situations (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Martin & Anderson, 1996a; Martin, Anderson, & Sirimangkala, 1997; Myers & Avtgis, 1997; Patterson & Beckett, 1995). According to Richmond and McCroskey (1995), individuals are classified as using one of four socio-communicative styles based on their levels of assertiveness and responsiveness. Competent individuals are high in both assertiveness and responsiveness whereas noncompetent individuals are low in both assertiveness and responsiveness. Aggressive individuals are high in assertiveness and low in responsiveness, and submissive individuals are low in assertiveness and high in responsiveness.

One way in which the influence of socio-communicative style can be studied in the instructional context is by examining the relationship among instructor socio-communicative style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness. Although this relationship has been examined in interpersonal and organizational contexts (e.g., Martin & Anderson, 1996a, 1996b; Martin, Anderson et al., 1997), the study of this relationship in the instructional context is particularly important for two reasons. First, not only do students respond to perceived instructor assertiveness and responsiveness (e.g., Robinson, 1993; Thomas et al., 1994; Martin, Chesebro et al., 1997), but instructor communication behaviors affect student perceptions of supportive and defensive classroom environments (e.g., Darling & Civikly, 1987; Myers, 1995; Stuart &

Rosenfeld, 1994). Second, the presence of either argumentative or verbally aggressive behaviors can have either a positive or a negative influence on the outcome of communication situations, respectively (Infante, Anderson, Martin, Herington, & Kim, 1993; Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Martin & Anderson, 1995). And as Haleta (1996) noted, teachers create powerful impressions which are exhibited through their classroom talk.

According to Infante and Rancer (1982), argumentativeness is conceptualized as the predisposition to defend one's position on controversial issues while simultaneously attempting to refute another person's position. High argumentatives view an argument as an exciting event and experience a sense of accomplishment with the event, even if the argument is not won (Infante, 1987). High argumentatives are perceived as being more competent communicators (Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1991), are rated higher in leadership capabilities (Infante & Gorden, 1987), are viewed as more credible (Infante, 1981), and achieve more at work (Infante & Gorden, 1985). In the organizational setting, argumentative subordinates are more likely to use control and collaboration strategies rather than compromise or nonconfrontation strategies when engaged in conflict with their superiors (Martin, Anderson et al., 1997).

Because argumentativeness is a subset of assertiveness (Infante, 1987), individuals high in assertiveness should be high in argumentativeness. Across interpersonal interactions, competent and aggressive communicators are rated higher in argumentativeness than noncompetent and submissive communicators (Martin & Anderson, 1996a). Likewise, competent and aggressive subordinates are more argumentative with their superiors than their noncompetent and submissive peers (Martin, Anderson et al., 1997). Due to this relationship between socio-communicative style and argumentativeness, it is expected that a similar relationship exists in the classroom. Rancer,

Baukus, and Infante (1985) found that not only do high argumentatives have more positive beliefs about arguing, but that they view argument as a way in which learning can be enhanced. According to Infante (1987), argumentativeness promotes a discussion of the subject matter without attacking an individual's self-concept. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1 Competent and aggressive instructors will be rated higher in argumentativeness than noncompetent and submissive instructors.

Verbal aggressiveness is defined as a message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Verbally aggressive messages take many forms, which include character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks, malediction, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, and nonverbal emblems (Infante, 1987; Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992). Verbally aggressive individuals believe that the use of such messages is often justified (Infante, Bruning, & Martin, 1994), although the psychological hurt associated with a verbally aggressive message is higher when the message is received from a friend than from an acquaintance (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996). Verbally aggressive individuals are viewed as less credible (Infante, Hartley, Martin, Higgins, Bruning, & Hur, 1992), are evaluated less favorably at work (Infante & Gorden, 1989), and fail to use either compromising or collaborating conflict management strategies with work superiors (Martin, Anderson et al., 1997).

Because verbal aggression is inherently hostile (Infante, 1995), individuals high in responsiveness should be low in verbal aggressiveness. Martin and Anderson (1996a) found that noncompetent and aggressive communicators are more verbally aggressive than competent and submissive communicators; however, Martin, Anderson et al. (1997) were unable to confirm this

finding in a study of organizational subordinates. Because verbally aggressive messages may cause a receiver to feel inadequate, embarrassed, humiliated, hopeless, angry, or depressed (Infante, 1987, 1995), verbally aggressive instructors are not likely to be viewed as responsive. Infante et al. (1994) noted that verbally aggressive messages are used, among other reasons, to serve as means of reprimand or manipulation. Instructors who engage in verbal aggression for these reasons will undoubtedly not be viewed as responsive. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2 Noncompetent and aggressive instructors will be rated as higher in verbal aggressiveness than competent and submissive instructors.

Method

Participants

Participants were 139 (50 male, 89 female) undergraduate students enrolled in a variety of courses at a small southern university. All respondents volunteered to participate in the study.

The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 50 years (M = 20.89, SD = 4.5). Sixty-three (n = 63) participants were freshmen, 35 participants were sophomores, 13 participants were juniors, and 28 participants were seniors. No other demographic data were collected.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed the Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990), a modified version of the Argumentativeness scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982), and a modified version of the Verbal Aggressiveness scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Using a procedure advocated by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), participants completed the instruments in reference to the instructor of the course they attended immediately prior to the research session. Data were collected during the last week of the semester.

The Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure is a 20-item instrument that asks respondents to report their perceptions of the individual with whom they interacted. Responses are solicited using a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Scores are calculated for both the assertiveness (10 items) and the responsiveness (10 items) dimensions. Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .83 to .91 for the assertiveness dimension, and from .83 to .93 for the responsiveness dimension (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Martin & Anderson, 1996a, 1996b; Myers & Avtgis, 1997; Patterson & Beckett, 1995; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990; Wooten & McCroskey, 1996). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .89 (M = 37.09, SD = 8.45) was reported for the assertiveness measure and a coefficient alpha of .96 (M = 36.40, SD = 10.55) was reported for the responsiveness measure.

The Argumentativeness Scale is a 20-item instrument that asks respondents to report perceptions of their argumentative behaviors. Responses are solicited using a five-point scale ranging from almost always true (5) to almost never true (1). In this study, two modifications were made. First, although the scale was originally designed as a self-report measure, respondents were asked to report their perceptions of their instructor's argumentative behaviors. Second, a 10-item version of the scale was used. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .73 to .82 have been reported for the 10-item version (Infante et al., 1993; Infante & Gorden, 1989; Martin & Anderson, 1996a, 1996b). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .70 (M = 30.77, SD = 7.12) was obtained for the 10-item scale.

The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale is a 20-item instrument that asks respondents to report perceptions of their verbally aggressive behaviors. Responses are solicited using a five-point scale ranging from almost always true (5) to almost never true (1). In this study, two modifications

were made. Again, although the scale was originally designed as a self-report measure, respondents were asked to report their perceptions of their instructor's verbally aggressive behaviors. Second, a 10-item version of the scale was used. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .75 to .90 have been reported for the 10-item version (Infante et al., 1993; Infante & Gorden, 1989; Martin & Anderson, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .76 (M = 21.12, SD = 7.05) was obtained for the 10-item scale.

Data analysis

Following the procedure utilized by Anderson and Martin (1995), a median split of both the assertiveness (37/38) and the responsiveness (38/39) items was used to classify instructors into the four socio-communicative styles. In this study, 45 instructors were classified as competent (high assertiveness, high responsiveness), 48 instructors were classified as noncompetent (low assertiveness, low responsiveness), 24 instructors were classified as aggressive (high assertiveness, low responsiveness), and 22 instructors were classified as submissive (low assertiveness, high responsiveness).

Both hypotheses were examined using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA). For hypothesis one, the summed argumentativeness score served as the dependent variable and the four socio-communicative styles (e.g., competent, noncompetent, aggressive, submissive) served as the independent variable. For hypothesis two, the summed verbal aggressiveness score served as the dependent variable and the four socio-communicative styles served as the independent variable. Significant findings were subsequently examined using follow-up (Scheffe) analyses.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that competent and aggressive instructors would be rated

higher in argumentativeness than noncompetent and submissive instructors. This hypothesis was partially supported, $F(3,135) = 3.39$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1). Competent instructors were rated significantly higher in argumentativeness than submissive instructors. Aggressive instructors were rated significantly higher in argumentativeness than either noncompetent or submissive instructors. A significant difference in argumentativeness between competent and aggressive instructors was not found.

The second hypothesis predicted that noncompetent and aggressive instructors would be rated higher in verbal aggressiveness than competent and submissive instructors. This hypothesis was supported, $F(3,135) = 8.69$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). Noncompetent and aggressive instructors were rated significantly higher in verbal aggressiveness than either competent or submissive instructors. A significant difference in verbal aggressiveness between noncompetent and aggressive instructors was not found.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship among instructor socio-communicative style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom. It was found that (a) competent and aggressive instructors are rated higher in argumentativeness than noncompetent and submissive instructors and (b) noncompetent and aggressive instructors are rated higher in verbal aggressiveness than competent and submissive instructors. Generally, these findings have two important ramifications. First, the results replicate prior research conducted on how socio-communicative styles can be differentiated in terms of argumentative and verbally aggressive behaviors (Martin & Anderson, 1996a, 1996b; Martin, Anderson et al., 1997). Second, the results underscore the role that instructor socio-communicative style plays in the

college classroom, especially when coupled with instructor argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness.

The first hypothesis, which was partially supported, predicted that competent and aggressive instructors would be rated higher in argumentativeness than noncompetent and submissive instructors. Although both competent and aggressive instructors were perceived as being more argumentative than submissive instructors, only aggressive instructors were rated as being more argumentative than noncompetent instructors. Because both competent and aggressive instructors are rated high in assertiveness, this finding is not surprising. According to Richmond and McCroskey (1995), assertive individuals usually prompt others to communicate more. Individuals who are rated high in assertiveness are also more nonverbally immediate and expressive in their interactions than individuals who are rated low in assertiveness (Prisbell, 1985). Moreover, argumentativeness is a positive construct that can facilitate the learning process (Rancer et al., 1985). Thus, assertive instructors may stimulate discussion, foster thinking, promote interaction, and encourage argument among students as well as between students and instructors.

In addition, the assertive behaviors associated with competent and aggressive instructors may lend themselves more easily to student perceptions of instructor argumentativeness. For example, Johnson and Johnson (1979) concluded that argumentativeness is associated with greater curiosity, increased problem-solving ability, greater creativity, and increased perspective-taking ability. Infante (1981) found that high argumentatives are more task-oriented and less flexible than low argumentatives. Because college students report that classroom structure (e.g., task orientation, instructor flexibility) serves as a source of motivation (e.g., Gorham &

Christophel, 1995; Gorham & Millette, 1997), perhaps these attributes can be applied to assertive college instructors.

The second hypothesis, which was supported, predicted that noncompetent and aggressive instructors would be rated higher in verbal aggressiveness than competent and submissive instructors. Because both noncompetent and aggressive instructors are rated low in responsiveness, this finding is not surprising. According to Richmond and McCroskey (1995), responsive individuals invite others to participate in communication. Because verbally aggressive messages attack a person's self concept (Infante & Wigley, 1986), it makes sense that verbally aggressive instructors will not be viewed as being responsive toward students. However, it is possible that some instructors who use verbally aggressive messages do so as a means to appear "tough" or as a way to be viewed as humorous (Infante et al., 1992), and do not intentionally attempt to disparage students. Although the intent behind instructors' verbal aggression was not examined in this study, it is plausible that regardless of the intent, students may feel that instructor verbal aggression is simply not warranted.

Although verbal aggression can be used to induce argument or to manipulate behavior (Infante et al., 1994)--two additional reasons why instructors might use verbal aggression--the structure of the college classroom may not lend itself to a correct assessment of instructors' use. Infante et al. (1992) noted that the context of the verbally aggressive message, which includes the anticipated consequences of the message as well as the source, affects the assessment. Moreover, college students differentiate between "good" and "bad" teachers on the basis of verbal communication behaviors (e.g., Sorensen, 1989). College students generally expect their instructors to engage in prosocial, confirming communication behaviors (e.g., Kearney, Plax,

Hays, & Ivey, 1991), which include being responsive to student needs and concerns. Consequently, instructors who fail to engage in responsive behaviors may be seen as more verbally aggressive.

Future research may consider examining how competent, noncompetent, aggressive, and submissive instructors are perceived to differ in their use of additional communication behaviors. Martin, Chesebro et al. (1997) found that competent instructors are perceived to be the most caring, the most trustworthy, and the most credible among the four socio-communicative styles. They also found that students are more highly motivated by competent instructors. Thomas et al. (1994) discovered that nonverbally immediate instructors are viewed as being both assertive and responsive. By being credible, by serving as a motivating source, and by being nonverbally immediate, it appears that competent instructors have an edge when it comes to communicating effectively with students in the classroom.

Due to the relatively small sample size, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. Yet, these findings indicate that competent, noncompetent, aggressive, and submissive college instructors differ in their use of argumentative and verbally aggressive communication behaviors. Competent and aggressive instructors are generally rated higher in argumentativeness whereas noncompetent and aggressive instructors are generally rated higher in verbal aggressiveness. By examining these two variables in light of instructor socio-communicative style, it is possible to identify ways in which instructors can enhance their classroom communication behaviors.

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Table 1

One-way analyses of variance for socio-communicative style

	Competence		Noncompetent		Aggressive		Submissive	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Argumentativeness	31.76_{a}	7.49	29.77_{bc}	6.15	33.67_{b}	7.89	27.77_{ac}	6.31
Verbal aggressiveness	18.42_{ac}	6.52	23.31_{ab}	5.99	24.79_{cd}	6.95	17.91_{bd}	7.15

Note. Means sharing subscripts across each row differ significantly at the .05 level based on Scheffe follow-up analyses.